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ABSTRACT

The focus in the present study was on children's expectancies about how parents would respond to their children's genuine emotional-expressive displays, as sampled across seven different vignettes about parent-child interaction. The vignettes consisted of schematic cartoons and a verbal narrative. They contained "emotional displays" of annoyance, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, distress, and interest. The vignettes also varied in social context: four involved people other than the child and parent figures, and three cast the child protagonist in a vulnerable position. The 85 children from grades 2, 5, and 8 who participated in the study were individually interviewed about their expectations of parental reactions to the protagonist's emotional display, and were asked for their justifications for the selected parental reactions. Few age differences were found for children's expectations. Across all age groups the majority of children reported expecting controlling parental reactions when a third party was present. However, more older than younger children expected accepting parental responses when the protagonist was in a vulnerable position. In general, when children expected controlling reactions, those reactions were justified by appeals to conventionality or the need for a change in the child's feelings or behavior. When accepting reactions were expected, justifications focused on the feelings of the protagonist or others present. (Examples of some of the vignettes are appended.) (Author/BN)

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Symposium: Emotions and Relationships

Presentation: "Children's Beliefs about Parental Expectations for Emotional-Expressive Behavior Management"

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Children's Beliefs about Parental Expectations for Emotional-Expressive Behavior Management

Carolyn Saarni

Children begin to demonstrate a competent understanding of emotions early in life (e.g., Lewis & Michalson, 1983). Words for feeling states are evident in many two-year olds' vocabulary (e.g., Miller & Sperry, 1987), and parents often become aware that their toddler or preschooler may intentionally manipulate the display of an emotion to accomplish some other unrelated social objective (e.g., a trivial injury becomes an opportunity to get attention). School-age children give us impressively articulate descriptions of their own and others' feelings and expressive behaviors (see Saarni & Harris, in press). Yet we are missing in our research base on children's understanding of emotion a systematic description of what children come to understand as the interpersonal consequences of emotional-expressive behavior. These "interpersonal consequences" to our emotional behavior play a pivotal role in the socialization of emotions and expressive behavior. We learn how, where, and with whom to show our feelings or to monitor their expression, and, indeed, we learn how to negotiate our interpersonal transactions by means of regulating and monitoring our emotional-expressive behavior. The impact on our relationships is profound, for discrepancies between emotional state and expressive behavior invariably affect the interactions we have with others (e.g., social control, impression management, dominance assertion, gaining approval-/avoiding disapproval, etc.).

The family context is a significant one for the socialization of emotions and expressive displays and may be the primary interpersonal nexus

in which children begin to anticipate how others will react to their showing their feelings. Certainly Dunn and Munn's (1985) research with 2-year olds and their families indicates that even young children can demonstrate some anticipated interpersonal reaction to their expressive behavior (e.g., how to set up their older sibling to become distressed). Thus, our focus in the present study was on children's expectancies about how parents would respond to their children's genuine emotional-expressive displays, as sampled across seven different vignettes about parent-child interaction. We also asked children to provide a justification for why they thought the parent would respond this way to the child-protagonist's emotional display in each vignette. (Note that we did not ask children about their own personal experience with their own parents.)

Method

Subjects

Our sample consisted of 85 lower- to middle-class public school children, approximately evenly divided by gender and across grades 2, 5, and 8 (mean ages 7.9, 11.0, and 13.0 years, respectively). The children were residents of Sonoma County in Northern California; this region is characterized by recent high growth combined with a relatively prosperous wine-producing agricultural community.

Stimulus Materials

The seven vignettes consisted of schematic cartoons and a verbal narrative and had the following themes (emotional displays are in parentheses): (1) receiving an unwanted gift (annoyance), (2) being threatened by a bully (fear), (3) being served an unappetizing casserole (disgust), (4) laughing during a funeral (happiness), (5) making a mistake during a solo performance (sadness), (6) getting an injection (distress), and (7)

staring at an accident victim (interest). The cartoons and accompanying narratives were systematically varied according to whether a mother or father was present in the vignettes with half of the children seeing "mothers" and half "fathers." However, girls saw only female protagonists, and boys saw only male protagonists. As an example, the injection vignette has been appended to this paper; see Figure 1.

While the vignettes were originally selected from among the 20 items on the Parent Attitude toward Children's Expressiveness Scale (Saarni, 1985) to represent both a range of emotional displays and to be readily comprehensible to grade-school children, they also varied in critical ways in social context. That is, four of the vignettes directly involved other people besides the child and parent figures; e.g., it is Grandmother who is serving the parent and child an unappetizing casserole. As discussed below, children took this into account when predicting the parent's reaction to the child protagonist's expressive display. The remaining three vignettes (having been threatened by a bully, making a mistake during a solo performance, and getting an injection) did not directly involve other people. In addition, these three vignettes cast the child protagonist in a vulnerable position, regardless of the emotions displayed (i.e., fear, sadness, distress, respectively). As will be discussed relative to the results, across all age groups children were keenly aware of these social context differences and responded quite differently to these contextual nuances.

Procedure and Coding of Variables

The children were individually interviewed at their school. This structured interview yielded the two dependent variables of interest, (a) the child's anticipated parental reaction to the protagonist's emotional

display and (b) the child's justification for the selected parental reaction.

Parental reaction variable. This first variable required the child to choose from four alternatives which had been ranked from most accepting of the child's feelings to most restrictive or controlling toward the child's feelings. This ranking had been established through prior research using the Parent Attitude toward Children's Expressiveness Scale (Saarni, 1985). Each of the seven vignettes had its own thematically relevant four choices. The appended injection vignette (Figure 1) provides the four relevant choices and their weights relative to the dimension of acceptance-control as well as the interview questions posed, including a comprehension check.

Justification variable. The second dependent variable was the child's justification for the parental reaction selected; it was coded categorically and separately for each of the seven vignettes. The coding categories were designed with Selman and Demorest's (1984) developmental model for interpersonal negotiation strategies in mind. The differences in context and interview from those used by Selman and Demorest were significant and required that we adopt their categories in a descriptive fashion only. Thus, their Level 0 ("a lack of the coordination of the perspectives of the protagonist and the significant other in the consideration of a particular problem," Selman, et al., 1986, p. 451) descriptively corresponds to our first category in which the child justifies the parent's reaction (whether accepting or restrictive) to the child's emotional display on the simple basis of "that's what parents do" or "that's what my father/mother would do" with no elaboration.

Selman's Level 1 ("recognition of the conflict that the significant other's perspective may differ from the protagonist's," but the perspec-

tives are not coordinated and result in one-way commands or assertions) is reflected in what we coded for our second category as an appeal to conventionality (e.g., "it's impolite," "it's not right to giggle at funerals).

Selman's Level 2 interpersonal strategies reflect an understanding of reciprocity and that the other has feelings which can influence the protagonist, but genuine collaboration or mutuality is absent or tentative at best. Our coding scheme departs substantially from Selman's here in that we are already asking children to articulate what a fictional parent would do to a fictional child-protagonist, and such a task by definition requires recursive thinking and coordination of perspectives. However, our third and fourth coding categories do contain elements of the unilaterality that is a key differentiator between Selman's Levels 2 and 3. We called our third category an appeal for the child to change, and examples of when it was applied to children's justifications for the parental reaction to the child-protagonist's emotional display include "she (mother) thought she (daughter) should feel guilty," "he (father) wanted him (son) to feel braver and stick up for himself," and "she (daughter) should appreciate the gift."

Our fourth "unilateral" category we called an appeal to the parent's feelings, and examples include "she felt embarrassed by her child," "he (father) was disappointed because he (son) was rude," and "she (mother) didn't want to make a scene." In other words, nobody else's feelings were taken into account in the final justification for why the parent reacted the way he/she did.

Selman's Level 3 strategies emphasize collaboration and mutuality in interpersonal negotiation. Our corresponding coding categories 5 and 6 were applied to justifications which contained an appeal to the feelings of

another in the vignette or an appeal to the genuine feelings of the child, respectively. Examples of the first include "his grandfather (who gave an inappropriate gift) may be senile, and you have to be patient," "other people feel sad at funerals, and it bothers them to hear someone laughing," and "staring at him might make him (accident victim) feel worse." Examples of when the child's feelings were taken into account by the parent include "she (mother) wanted to comfort him and help him forget the pain (from the injection)," "he (father) wouldn't want to embarrass her," and "she felt really upset for her daughter having to go through that scary thing (threatening bully)."

The correlation for inter-rater reliability on the justification coding categories was calculated on a random half of the protocols; the coefficient was $r = .79$. Subsequently all protocols were coded independently by a second rater, and differences were resolved by discussion.

Hypotheses. We hypothesized that with increasing age children would be more likely to endorse higher-level justification categories. Much more tentatively we wondered whether older children would also endorse more accepting or lenient reactions of parents to children's genuine feelings rather than restrictive reactions. Older children begin to recognize (apropos Selman's Level 3) that parents have feelings about their children's feelings and can respond empathically to their children's emotional displays. A counter-argument, however, could be that a more negative parental reaction would occur to older children if they reveal feelings that conventionally would tend to be regulated or managed (i.e., "older children should know better..."). If the first two hypotheses are true, then there also ought to be a negative correlation between the ranked parental reaction (higher rank = more restrictive reaction) and the

justification (higher categories associated with higher-level interpersonal negotiation strategies).

Results

Correlations

Indeed, the results were only partially supportive of the hypotheses, and the effect of vignette or context proved to be considerably stronger than anticipated. Of the seven vignettes, four showed significant correlations between age and choice of parental reaction ($p < .05$). Of these, three were negative (correlation coefficients were modest, ranging from -.25 to -.32), suggesting that with increasing age children tend to anticipate more accepting or lenient responses from their parents (recall that lower scores are more accepting). The one positive correlation was for the vignette about receiving an inappropriate gift from Grandfather, when older children did expect a more negative, restrictive reaction from parents ($r = .31$, $p < .04$).

Age did not correlate with the ranked coding categories for justifying the parental reaction to the child-protagonist's emotional display. Thus, our coding categories failed to represent developmental increments in children's understanding of parent reactions to children's expressive displays, instead striking differences in patterns of justifications were obtained across the vignettes. Figure 2 contains histograms depicting for each vignette the proportional frequencies of the justification categories, collapsed across age groups and gender. Noteworthy is that for the three "vulnerable child" vignettes children tended to justify the parental reaction in terms of an appeal to the genuine feelings of the child or the child should change how they feel (i.e., be less vulnerable to negative affect). For the four vignettes in which other people were also directly

impacted, the most frequent justification given was an appeal to conventionality (e.g., "be polite"). Second most frequent justifications were an appeal to another's feelings (vignettes: getting an unwanted gift, staring at an accident victim) or the parent's feelings (giggling at the funeral), and for the disgusting casserole vignette, the second most frequent justification by our child subjects was that the child should change her/his behavior (e.g., not show disgust in facial expression or tone of voice).

The relationship between parent reaction, ranging from accepting to controlling, and category of justification was also clouded. Only 3 out of 7 correlations between parental reaction and justification category were significant and in the expected direction, suggesting that more permissive or accepting parental reactions were associated with higher justification categories which, in turn, may be reflective of more mature interpersonal negotiation strategies. Once again the context of the vignette appeared to be a major determinant for which parent reactions were expected.

Log Linear Analyses

Because the justification categories did not empirically constitute a "developmental scale," at least not within this age span of 7 to 14 years, we decided to analyze the justifications children gave as nominal categories rather than as ranks. In addition, while age group did not correlate with our coding categories for justifications when they were conceptualized as ranks, it was unclear whether age might be interacting with other variables in affecting what sort of justification was provided by the child (for example, sex of child, sex of the parent figure, and the initial selection of parent reaction to the protagonist's display). Thus, we turned to log linear analyses as a statistical method for examining how

children make sense of parental reactions to emotional displays by their children. (See Knoke & Burke, 1980, for an overview of log linear models; see also Tisak, 1986, for an example of log linear analyses applied to developmental research.) Lastly, it had become evident that we would need to conduct the analyses separately for each vignette since context played such a pervasive role in how children made sense of parental reaction to child emotional expressiveness.

For each vignette we first examined a general effects model, wherein variation was evaluated among all variables: three age groups, child sex, parent sex (in the vignette), the four parent reaction choices, and the six justification categories. The general model may be rejected if main effects or interactions among two or more variables are found. When using the SPSS-X program for these analyses, one can also examine the partial chi-squares for the degree to which a main effect or interaction term is contributing to the model that best fits one's data.

Table 1 displays for each vignette the significant and near-significant ($p < .10$) partial chi-squares.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Each vignette produced different patterns; however, a summary of the patterns across vignettes is as follows:

1. For all seven vignettes the main effects of both parent reaction choice and justification category were significant.

2. For all vignettes, except for the one about the unappetizing casserole served by Grandmother, the interaction of parent reaction choice X justification category was significant. In general, if the subject child

expected a controlling parental reaction to the display of the protagonist's genuine feelings, the child justified that parental reaction by an appeal to conventionality ("don't be rude") or that the protagonist ought to change his/her feelings and/or behavior. The justifications based on an appeal to conventionality occurred in the vignettes where a third person was also involved (i.e., grandmother/father, accident victim, or funeral party). The justifications based on the belief that the child should change his/her feelings and/or behavior were obtained in the vignettes in which the protagonist was in an emotionally vulnerable position (i.e., getting an injection, being threatened, making a mistake during a solo performance).

In contrast, if the child expected an accepting parental reaction to the display of genuine feelings, the child justified the response by emphasizing that the parent was concerned with how the protagonist felt and occasionally by how others or the parent might feel. There was less of a sharp demarcation by vignette context for these justifications, although the proportion justifying the parent reaction by appealing to how the child felt tended to be higher in the "vulnerable" vignettes.

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate these different patterns for the bully vignette (vulnerable protagonist) and the gift vignette (Grandfather is also present and likely to be affected by the protagonist's display of genuine feelings, namely, annoyance). The four parent reaction choices ranging from very accepting to very controlling have been dichotomized into just two categories, accepting and controlling, in these two tables. The bully and gift vignette narratives and the four ranked parent reaction choices have also been included in the tables.

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Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

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3. Age group interacted with parent reaction choice in the casserole, solo, and injection vignettes: older children more frequently anticipated more accepting parental reactions when the child protagonist was vulnerable (solo and injection vignettes), but when someone else's feelings might be involved, e.g., Grandmother's, then older children were more likely to expect more controlling reactions from parents as compared to the youngest children.

Two significant three-way interactions involving age group, parent sex, and parent reaction choice were found. It appeared that older children expected more controlling responses from mothers in the accident and gift vignettes (both vignettes involve "vulnerable others").

4. Age group interacted with justification category only in the funeral and solo vignettes. For the funeral vignette, older children justified parents' response by emphasizing the conventional norms for behavior at funerals; the youngest children used this category as well but a good number justified the parent reaction based on the impact the protagonist child's giggling would have on others' feelings. For the solo vignette older children justified parental reaction more frequently by an appeal to the child's feelings, e.g., the parent would want to comfort their child in this context, while the youngest children more often based the parent reaction on the premise that the child should change his/her feelings and behavior.

Significant partial chi-square values for two three-way interactions involving age group, parent sex, and justification category were also

obtained. However, cell counts were too low to permit meaningful interpretation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Most impressive to us was the lack of distinct age differences in how children in this span of seven years articulated what they thought would be the parental response to a display of genuine feelings. For two of the three "vulnerable" vignettes older children did think parents would be more accepting of the protagonist's feelings than did younger children. However, across all age groups the majority of children selected the more controlling parental reactions for the four vignettes in which a third party was also present and likely to be affected by the protagonist's display of genuine feelings.

What these data show is that by the early elementary school grades children clearly perceive the themes represented in the vignettes as meaningful; that is, they saw parents as indeed having a reaction to their children's display of emotions -- and this was in regard to fictionalized scenarios. We might infer that with regard to their own personal experience this understanding that important others, such as parents, react in predictable ways to one's display of emotion would be articulated at still younger ages.

The children also distinguished among the vignettes in terms of whether it was the child protagonist who could be emotionally vulnerable versus whether some other person in the story might become vulnerable (e.g., get their feelings hurt by the protagonist's display of genuine emotion, such as annoyance at the inappropriate gift or disgust at the strange-looking casserole). This robust finding echos that found by Doubleday, Kovaric, Dorr, Seidner, and Lotta (1986), who found that "second

graders knew control norms involving consequences for others better than norms involving consequences for the self" (p. 7). Doubleday, et al. used a solely verbal questionnaire format in contrast to the cartoon-plus-narrative format used in the present study. The pictorial accompaniment to the narrative may have aided the present sample's second grade children to discern clearly and readily whether the protagonist or the other impacted figure would become vulnerable by the protagonist's display of genuine emotion.

Intriguing individual differences lie in why some children believed parents would react with acceptance or "tolerance" while others anticipated a more restrictive or controlling parental response. We have yet to analyze our data for how consistent children were across the vignettes collectively or across the two subtypes (i.e., vignettes about a vulnerable child or about a vulnerable other).

Use of vignettes about fictitious parents and their children may have also limited what effect the sex of the parent may have had in relation to what our subjects thought would be the parental reaction to the protagonist's display of genuine feelings. Asking children directly how their own mother as opposed to their father would have reacted in these contextual circumstances might have yielded interpretable patterns, perhaps in relation to the age of the child. We did obtain several significant 3-way interactions involving age group and parent sex with one or the other of the two dependent measures, and there did appear to be some tendency for older children to anticipate more controlling responses from their mothers in a couple of the vignettes involving another person.

Children's understanding of emotions in the family clearly merits further investigation. To date, important research by Harter (1982) and by

Covell and Abramovitch (1985), among others, have examined children's attributions for emotions in parents, but we have lacked a descriptive base for what children anticipate as parental reactions to their own display of feelings. The present research begins to provide some of that descriptive base.

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Table 1

Significant ($P < .10$) Partial Chi-squares for Each Vignette

Name of Vignette	Effect Name	Partial Chi-Square Value	Df	Probability
Injection				
	justification category	85.16	5	.0000
	parent reaction choice	44.31	3	.0000
	parent react. x just.cat.	35.11	15	.002
	age grp. x parent react.	12.54	6	.05
Solo				
	justification category	56.34	4	.0000
	parent react. x just.cat.	52.90	12	.0000
	parent reaction choice	16.56	3	.0009
	age grp. x parent react.	19.22	8	.01
	age grp.x parent sex x justification cat.	18.02	8	.02
	child sex x parent sex x justification cat.	9.23	4	.05
	age grp. x parent react.	11.48	6	.07
Bully				
	justification category	74.78	4	.0000
	parent react. x just.cat.	54.93	12	.0000
	parent reaction choice	21.07	3	.0001
Victim				
	parent reaction choice	125.87	3	.0000
	justification category	111.84	5	.0000
	age grp. x parent sex x parent reaction	11.39	6	.07
	parent react. x just.cat.	22.32	15	.09
Funeral				
	parent reaction choice	70.85	3	.0000
	justification category	42.35	5	.0000
	parent react. x just.cat.	32.93	15	.0048
	age grp. x just. cat.	16.99	10	.07
	child sex x parent react.	6.92	3	.07
	parent sex x parent react.	6.54	3	.09

Table 1, continued

Name of Vignette	Effect Name	Partial Chi-Square Value	Df	Probability
Casserole				
	justification category	39.99	5	.0000
	parent reaction choice	29.86	3	.0000
	age grp. x parent react.	22.32	6	.001
	child sex x parent react.	7.48	3	.06
	age grp. x parent sex x justification cat.	17.44	10	.07
Gift				
	parent reaction choice	56.98	3	.0000
	justification category	47.96	5	.0000
	parent react. x just. cat.	31.13	15	.0084
	age grp. x parent sex x parent react. choice	7.73	3	.05
	age grp. x parent react.	10.66	6	.091

Table 2

Bully Vignette[1]

Proportion of Responses: Justification Category by Parent Reaction Choice

(Dichotomized into "Accepting" versus "Controlling")

	Justification Categories				
Parent Reaction Choice	Own parent behaves similarly	Conven-tional	Child should change	Parent's feelings	Child's feelings
Accepting	12.7%	5.5%	16.4%	14.5%	50.9%
Controlling	6.9%	0	82.8%	3.4%	6.9%

Chi-square = 35.97, d.f.=4, $p < .0000$

[1] Note: The accompanying narrative for the bully vignette is as follows: John had to deal with an awful kid who followed him part way home. The kid threatened him and called him a lot of really bad and insulting names. By the time he got home, John felt scared and so upset inside that he was about to cry. His father's reaction was:

a. He said, "If you don't want to be a sissy or scaredy-cat, you should stick up for yourself."
b. He felt upset himself and also comforted his son.
c. He said, "Be brave! Don't let the other kid see you so upset."
d. He comforted his son but also said, "Showing your fear to others sometimes causes problems."

("John" = "Jennifer" for female subjects; parent gender was systematically varied.)

Response weights: 1 (most accepting) = b, 2 = d, 3 = c, 4 (most controlling) = a.

Table 3

Gift Vignette

Proportion of Responses: Justification Category by Parent Reaction Choice

(Dichotomized into "Accepting" versus "Controlling")

	Justification Categories				
Parent Reaction Choice	Conventional	Child should change	Parent's feelings	Other's feelings (i.e., Grandfather)	Child's feelings
Accepting	8.3%	0	16.7%	33.3%	41.7%
Controlling	51.4%	17.1%	12.9%	18.6%	0

Chi-square = 36.63, d.f.=4, $p < .0000$

[1] Note: The accompanying narrative for the gift vignette is as follows:

During her family's celebration of her birthday, Rachel received some used records from her grandfather. She felt angry about the gift, because she had even told her grandfather what she did want. Her mother's reaction was:

a. She was annoyed with her daughter for being rude.
b. She looked the other way.
c. She reminded her to say thank-you.
d. She said, "It's too bad you didn't get what you wanted."

("Rachel" = "Rob" for male subjects; parent gender was systematically varied.)

Response weights: 1 (most accepting) = d, 2 = b, 3 = c, 4 (most controlling) = a.

Figure 1

Injection Vignette: (see next page for accompanying picture)

Read aloud with both picture and verbal narrative in front of the child: "This picture shows a girl named Erica. Erica was really afraid of shots. Today she had to get one, and she felt really shaky and upset as she was about to get the shot."

Comprehension check: "How does Erica feel? Why?"

"Now I'm going to read to you several things that the mother/father MIGHT say to their child. You can read along with me if you want, and I would like you to choose which statement comes the closest to what you think the mother/father would say to their child."

Read aloud:

1. He would comfort his daughter before and after the shot.
2. He told her not to embarrass him by crying while getting the shot.
3. He told her to try to pull herself together, to get more under control.
4. He said that thinking about the shot is more scary and painful that the shot itself.

(Response weights, from most accepting to most restrictive: 1, 4, 3, 2.)

Justification: "Why did you make that choice?"

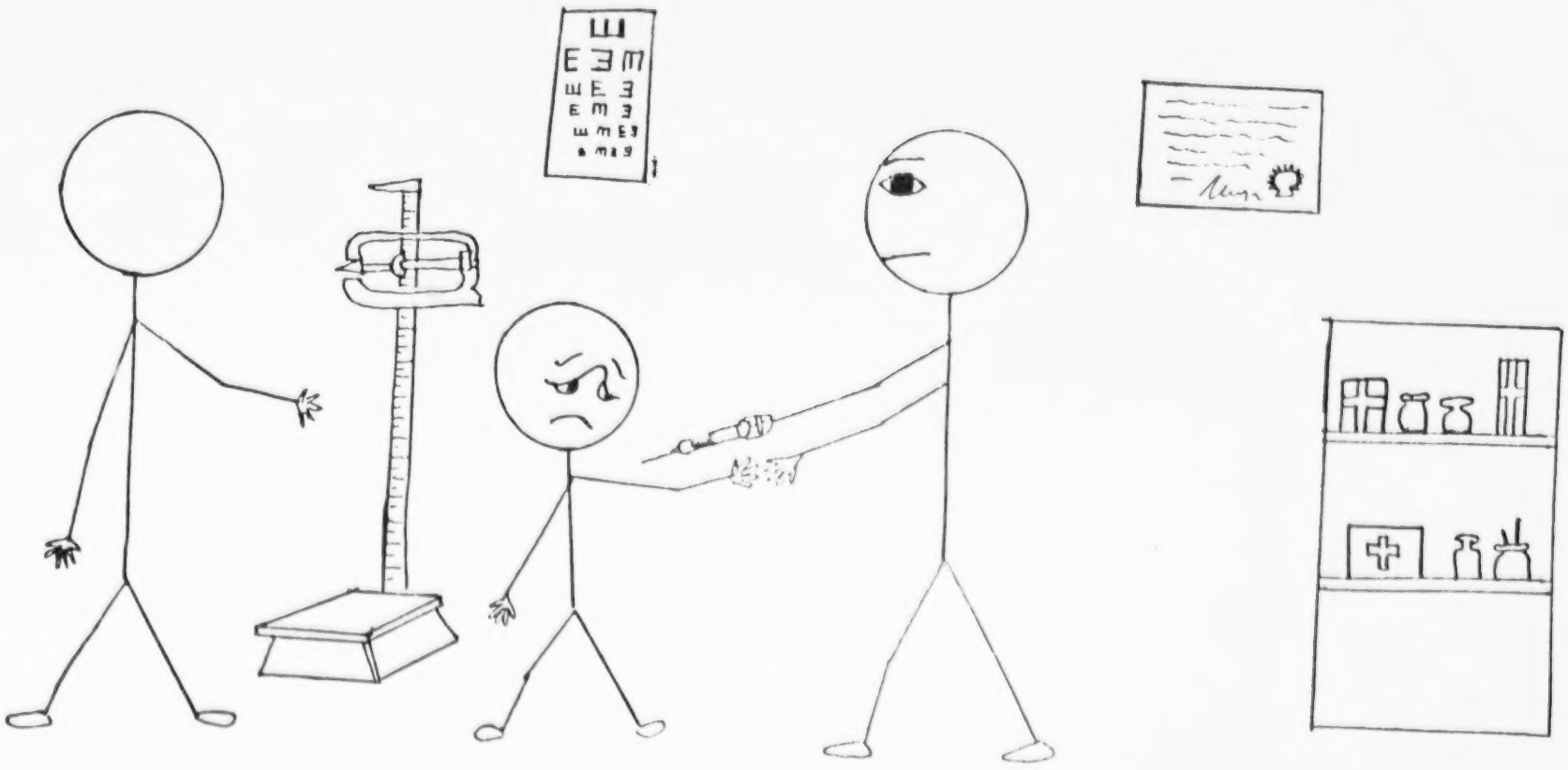

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Figure 2. Frequency proportions: Justification categories for each vignette.

Justification Category Descriptions:

1 = "that's what my parents do"
2 = appeal to conventionality
3 = appeal for the child to change
4 = appeal to the parent's feelings
5 = appeal to the feelings of another
6 = appeal to the genuine feelings of the child